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AUTHOR Willmington, S. Clay
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ABSTRACT

A study examined procedures used to test the oral communication skills of students between the ages of 15 and 18 in the United Kingdom, with special attention given to strategies which might be of value to adopt in the United States. Subjects were 4 pairs of students tested from a randomly selected sample of 112 schools. Twenty-two assessors were recruited from schools not involved in the assessment program. They were trained first by listening to two cassette tapes containing several examples of each student task exemplifying a range of performances obtained during a pilot project. Secondly, they were given intensive training in a two-day session at National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) offices. A test called for students to perform 7 different tasks. Performances were assessed by means of both impressionistic and analytic marking. Three general criteria were used to assess the sequential structure, lexico-grammatical features, and performance features. Results showed that standardized performance testing in speech on a large scale is possible when resources and a commitment are present. The closest corollary we have in the United States is forensics assessment. Similarities between the two programs include: both define specific speaking tasks for the student; both involve a period of preparation with a tutor or coach; and both involve evaluation by an outside evaluator. Dissimilarities include: English Speaking Board (ESB) tasks more closely adhere to real-life communication than most forensics events and involve job-related skills; and forensics events are more competitive and tend to involve only competent speakers. (RAE)

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STANDARDIZED ASSESSMENT OF TEEN-AGERS' ORAL COMMUNICATION
SKILLS IN THE UNITED KINGDOMBy S. Clay Willmington
University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh

A few years ago I learned of some unique and innovative programs to assess the oral communication skills of teen-agers in the United Kingdom (UK). Consequently, I sought and received a research grant to make an on-site study of these programs for a two-week period in the London area in the Spring of 1987. The purpose of this paper is to report my observations with special attention given to strategies which we might be able to adopt in the United States.

EDUCATION IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

In this paper I report assessment procedures used for students between the ages of 15 and 18, which is the traditional age range of students in our secondary schools. We should note, however, that in the U.K. students usually complete what is called their secondary school career by 16 years of age. By this time, they have had 11 years of education and completed a series of difficult exams called "O" (ordinary) levels. These exams cover subjects and prepare for exams during the last two years of school. Students wishing to enter a university take a series of "A" (advanced) level examinations.

Between the ages of 16 and 18, many students attend one of a variety of kinds of "colleges." The word college is mis-leading to those of us in the U.S. in that students in these schools are

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studying what we call vocational or technical studies as opposed to what we call college-level studies.

I was impressed with the energy and resources spent on standardized exams, including exams for oral communication. For example, the General Certificate for Secondary Education (GCSE) Guide for teachers in English which was used for the first time in Fall 1987, not only spells out in concrete and specific terms exactly what oral skills should be assessed, but also addresses ways to assure reliable assessment of oral communication.

Another method used to insure standardized assessment is by use of English Speaking Board (ESB) exams which I will discuss in detail later in the paper. Many schools require ESB exams as part of students' programs leading to a certificate. Schools maintain a line in their budgets to cover the costs of testing by outside agencies.

Still another guarantee that student performance is at an acceptable level, and that assessment is standardized, is by the efforts of accrediting agencies. Every program of study in every educational institution has an examining board, which is a professional institution, or some other organization. These boards check standards, moderate exams, and award certificates. These bodies are roughly parallel to agencies such as our State Departments of Public Instruction and the North Central Accrediting Association.

City and Guilds of London Institute (CGLI) is the largest examining body in the U.K. It sets courses, exams, and national

standards in over 200 subjects ranging from Engineering to Catering. CGLI prescribes a menu of speech assignments which students have to complete. Students maintain huge folders of their work which must be available for inspection by CGLI examiners at the end of the course. Folders include tapes of oral projects. Ordinarily, a moderator asks teachers to present for perusal folders which are considered representative of a cross-section of student performances. A moderator gives feedback to teachers on the extent to which student folders demonstrate performances which meet expectations.

NATIONAL FOUNDATION FOR
EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH (NFER)

NFER is an independent foundation undertaking research and development projects on issues of current interest in all sectors of the public education system. The closest corollary in the U.S. is probably Educational Testing Service. In 1975, when the British Government decided to inaugurate a program of national assessment of student performance in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, they contracted with NFER for the job.

The "racy" portion of the project was done in November 1982. Four pairs of students were tested from a randomly selected sample of 112 schools. A total of 22 assessors were recruited from schools not involved in the assessment program. They were trained first by listening to two cassette tapes containing several examples of each student task exemplifying a range of performances obtained during a pilot project. Secondly, they were given

intensive training in a two-day session at NFER offices.

Nature of the Tasks - The test called for students to perform seven different tasks.

Task 1, **Bridges**, involved one student holding pictures of six bridges which were basically similar, but all different in certain respects. The other student had pictures of only two of the bridges. This student described the two bridges in his possession for the purpose of the other student identifying which two of the six bridges were described.

Task 2, **Brain**, involved one student listening to a tape about the brain. Upon the completion of the tape, the student who had listened to the tape explained its content, with the aid of a diagram, to a student who had not heard the tape.

Task 3, **Spiders**, involved two students listening to a tape-recorded talk on spiders. The first part of the tape contained general data about spiders; the second part explained how the spider builds a web. Upon the completion of the tape, one student relayed the general information, while the other student explained how the web is built.

Task 4, **Recent Learning**, involved the student talking about the most interesting thing he/she had learned recently. The assessors were encouraged to ask questions, and the assessment was based on both the pupils' initial statement and their responses in the conversation. It was stressed that this learning did not have to come in school and about half of the experiences reported took place out of school.

Task 5, Description of a Place, involved the student describing a place which he/she knew well but was unknown by the assessor. The assessors did not prompt, and the assessment was based on what the student said unprompted.

Task 6, Teenagers, involved a discussion by four students on teenagers' position in society. As preparation for this, they took a short quiz on the ages at which certain legal rights and responsibilities are acquired. The assessor nominated one of the students as chairperson and gave his/her a brief explanation of the chairing role. The discussion lasted for 15 minutes, and was based upon a list of questions given to the chairperson by the assessor.

Task 7, Jobs, involved a student describing a job he/she knew about. Then, without prior warning, two students were asked to imagine that they were in the jobs they had just described, and given that only one of the two could get a pay raise, they engaged in an one-on-one debate on which person should receive the raise.

Procedures and Assessment Results - Performances were assessed by means of both impressionistic and analytic marking. An on-the-spot impressionistic assessment was made by use of a 1-7 scale reflecting communicative effectiveness and a 1-5 scale reflecting orientation to listener. A second impressionistic assessment was made later by raters listening to an audio tape. This rating was only for communicative effectiveness on the 1-7 scale. For some of the tapes analytic marking was also done.

Three general criteria were used to assess: the sequential structure, lexico-grammatical features and performance features. The sequential structure was rated on a 1-5 scale, based upon the way message was organized. The lexico-grammatical features were also rated on a 1-5 scale. This category was divided into two sub-categories: lexical selections, relating to the student's choice of words to express ideas or refer to objects or entities; and syntax, relating to the structure of the sentences used, primarily in terms of the complexity of clauses, and the means for linking clauses or sentences together. The final category, performance features, was rated on a 1-3 scale and was divided into hesitancy/fluency, tempo/pacing, and verbal assertiveness.

The correlation between the impressionistic scores and the analytic scores were as follows: sequential structure, .77; lexical selection, .63; syntax, .77, and performance features, .54. Correlations were also run between each of the two second markers and between each of the two second markers and the on-the-spot marker. These correlations ranged from .29 to .62.

Although further study on both the validity and reliability of the procedures needs to be done, NFER is rather satisfied with their pioneer work. They note that measures of agreement were as reliable as those typically achieved in the marking of written scripts.

ENGLISH SPEAKING BOARD

The English Speaking Board (ESB) is a professional association of speech teachers in the U.K. A major function of the ESB is to develop and administer standardized oral communication exams. These exams are administered in every kind of school and college, at all ages and levels, in both state and independent establishments, such as language schools, homes for the disabled, theological colleges, prisons, police training units, or anywhere where spoken communication is recognized as a basic life skill.

In this paper, I will focus only on exams which I saw administered, all of which were for students between the ages of 16 and 18. The four kinds of tests I observed were for "Hotel and Catering Students," "Nursery Nurses," "Young People in Vocational Training," and those with "Special Needs."

Normally, students enroll in a speech class which meets once per week under the direction of a teacher, more often called tutor. The activities of this class are designed to prepare students for the ESB exam. Near the end of the semester, the ESB assigns an examiner from outside the school to spend a day in the school building to conduct the exams. Examiners must attend at least one two-day workshop in any year that he/she is employed as an examiner. These workshops are designed to insure that the examinations are both administered and evaluated consistently.

Nature of the Tasks - The nature of the communication tasks required of students to demonstrate competency varies according to the program of study and to the level of the students.

Prepared Speech - In all cases, some kind of a report is

prepared and presented by each student. For example, nursery nurse students make a 4-5 minute demonstration to assist the language development of pre-school children or infants. This can relate to the use of a basic material such as sand, water, clay, or bricks; or equipment such as toys, models, or apparatus; or the description and demonstration of an activity. Vocational training students, on the other hand, give a 2-3 minute talk or demonstration related to some aspect of students' off-the-job training course or some skill acquired in their work experience. This is followed by 1-2 minutes of questions from peers or the examiner directed to the speaker about the presentation.

Communication by Telephone - Most exams include a telephone simulation. In the case of hotel and catering students, two students, as caller and receiver, conduct a short telephone conversation on a situation outlined by the examiner, examples being inquiring for supplies, reporting an accident, and requesting information. In assessing special needs (handicapped students), the examiner assumes a more active role than for regular students. For the telephone part, for example, the examiner is the caller and telephones the student who must answer and give his/her name. The student listens and responds to the examiner and then acts upon the request to bring the next named student to the telephone. Telephone headsets are used for these simulations and participants face away from each other.

Oral Reading - This task is included in virtually every ESB exam. Nursery nurse students bring a book, either one of personal

interest or a well written children's book, and show, by reading aloud a previously prepared passage, the ability to use dialogue and description to stimulate the response of the listeners. Hotel and catering students select and read an appropriate passage of approximately 200 words from a novel, journal or biography, which bears some relation to the overall project or chosen career.

Group Discussion - This is a typical student activity in ESB exams. For vocational students, three or four students are asked to spend 8-10 minutes discussing a topic or problem of general interest suggested by the assessor. Hotel and catering students are placed into groups of three or four and given a topic of current interest relative to their experience and asked to put forward their point of view and argue persuasively for 5-8 minutes.

Listening and Responding - One measure of most tests is of students' listening and responding to the presentations of other students engaged in communicating and to questions directed toward them. They are expected to express their own point of view reasonably and clearly.

Specialty Tasks - Certain tasks expected of students are unique to their particular preparation. For example, nursery nurse students may do one of two things: Present a story, poem or rhyme either as a solo item or a group presentation and show how to act it out with a group of children (creative drama; puppetry; acted verse or song). Special needs students are invited by name to make a contribution no way, other than gut reactions, for teachers to have any idea how their students' performances compare to the

performances of comparable students in other classrooms or other schools.

The situation described above is at the same time comforting and discomfoting. It is comforting to speech teachers because in a way, they have no one to whom they are really accountable. They can experiment freely or even wildly, work hard or hardly at all, and often there will be very little recognition of their successes or failures. It is discomfoting for those who seek to know by means of reliable data what, if anything, happens to students in a speech classroom.

In the U.K., examining boards function as described earlier to exercise some measure of quality control by examining samples of student work even in oral communication. This contrasts sharply with U.S. accrediting agencies who limit their scrutiny to paper work, none of which is produced by students. The ESB is instrumental in exercising a quality control function in Speech Education in many education programs in the U.K. We in the U.S. would do well to develop a plan to achieve this purpose. So the first lesson we learn from the U.K. is that standardized performance testing in speech on a large scale is possible when resources and a commitment are present.

In the development of standardized oral communication assessment programs in the U.S., we ought not to adopt U.K. programs exactly as they exist. But they can certainly serve as useful models for us. While certain criticisms or reservations can be raised regarding aspects of the work in the U.K., the purpose

of this paper is to note wherein they have succeeded and suggest ways of building upon this success.

As I observed ESB exams it occurred to me that the closest corollary we have in the U.S. is forensics. Similarities between the two programs include the following: (1) Both define specific speaking tasks for the student; (2) Both involve a period of preparation with a tutor (U.K.) or a coach (U.S.); (3) Both involve evaluation by an outside evaluation.

Unfortunately, there are more dissimilarities than similarities including: (1) ESB tasks more closely adhere to real-life communication than most forensics events; (2) The U.K. tutors with whom I interacted seemed to be quite competent in Speech Education, compared to U.S. forensics coaches, in high school in particular, many of whom are assigned to the program with little or no preparation or interest in the field; (3) ESB evaluators are all trained for their jobs, while in the U.S. there are neither qualifications nor training necessary to judge. Consequently, there is wholesale lack of reliability in ratings; (4) ESB exams are directly related to a student's course of study and is an integral part of the curriculum, while forensics may only incidentally relate to a student's career preparation and is seldom linked in any way to a high school or college curriculum; (5) All students in a given U.K. program take ESB exams, while forensics is an optional activity. Consequently, forensics participants usually enter the program because they are already somewhat proficient in some form of speaking and wish to gain recognition.

The students who are in greatest need of additional speech skills do not get involved; and (6) The nature of ESB exams encourage cooperation and mutual support among students. The attitude in a testing room is supportive and there is appropriate interaction among students and the evaluator. In the typical forensics contest room, there is a chill in the air as students suspiciously eye their competitors. There is little or no interaction among students and judges. So this is a major difference; in ESB exams the student competes only with him/herself in a cooperative environment; in the U.S., the student competes against other students in a competitive environment.

SUMMARY

In sum, for those of us who believe that we have work to do in oral communication assessment, we can be encouraged by the progress made in the United Kingdom. The future is promising that we can develop sound large scale standardized assessment programs by drawing upon the U.K. experience and possibly upon our own traditions in forensics.